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Berkeley scientists call House 'energy hog'

Report urges switch to fluorescent light bulbs, renewable power sources

By William Brand, STAFF WRITER

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BERKELEY — The lights may burn long into the night in the U.S. House of Representatives office complex and the Capitol in Washington in coming months, but they just might be energy-efficient lights, thanks to the work of a team of Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory scientists.

Not long after the Democrats took control of the House, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, perhaps in a not-so-subtle dig at the hands-off global-warming policies of the Bush administration, asked for a survey to find out what it would take to "green" House offices, that is, to modernize and streamline the buildings so they would have zero impact on the environment.

For technical help, Chief Administrative Officer Daniel Beard turned to Lawrence Berkeley, which has long had a reputation for unbiased, energy efficiency research.

The draft report's in, and it's not pretty.

The House office complex, which includes the House portion of the Capitol building, is an energy hog, clogged with obsolete appliances, electricity-sucking overhead lighting and leaky air conditioning and heating ducts. Worse, much of the electricity comes from high-polluting, coal-fired utility generators.

Evan Mills, leader of one Lawrence Berkeley team on the project, found the complex emitted about 91,000 tons of carbon dioxide in 2006, about the same amount as from

17,200 cars in a single year.

One easy recommendation: Change the lights. Swap energy-hungry incandescent lights for efficient, compact fluorescent lamps. "Immediately convert

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2,000 desk lamps to CFLs ... with six months, convert the remaining 10,000 desk lamps to CFL," the scientists said.

That would be the equivalent of removing 255 cars from the road and result in \$245,000 a year in energy savings, lab scientist Francis Rubinstein discovered.

Changing light bulbs is relatively easy. From there on it gets stickier.

Christopher Payne, the lab's principle research associate in Washington, who shepherded the report, explains many of the house buildings are old. The Capitol is more than 200 years old; the Cannon House Office Building was built in 1908; and the Rayburn House Office Building was finished in 1965.

"These buildings are examples of what I would call 'federal monumental architecture,'" Payne said. "They're big, solid — this is the seat of power — buildings with very high ceilings and thick walls."

Unlike many commercial office buildings, House offices and meeting rooms tend to be used around the clock, seven days a week, he said.

Recommendations, besides light bulbs, include:

-Shift to 100 percent renewable electric power. The House uses about 103,000 megawatts of power a year and renewable power would cost about 20 percent more, but eliminate 57,000 tons of greenhouse gas emissions a year, like removing 11,000 cars from the road.

-Install an ethanol tank and fueling pump and switch official House vehicles to ethanol within the next six months.

House vehicles may chug around on ethanol fairly soon, but don't look for solar panels to sprout on House rooftops anytime soon, Payne said. "There are 19 different agencies with authority over changes to buildings in the federal core and some of them have veto power," he said.

But the House is very interested in doing something soon, he said. It wants the changes accomplished before the end of the 110th Congress in 2008, he said. After all, who knows what voters will do then.


There's another bottom line item in the report. Even after taking all possible practical steps to cut polluting carbon emissions, the complex will still emit carbon dioxide. One answer, Beard, the administrative officer suggests, would be to purchase "pollution offset credits," making a payment to another entity to allow it to cut pollution, a process used by some of those polluting coal generators, for example.

Another idea would be for the House to contribute a per-ton payment to a "Green Revolving Fund" to pay for energy savings in the future. A final report — a requirement before the House takes action — is scheduled for release June 30.

The draft report can be found at <http://www.speaker.gov/pdf/GTCreport.pdf>.

Contact staff writer William Brand at bbrand@angnewspapers.com.

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